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GOOD CUSTOMS, BAD CUSTOMS in North Sumatra



**Toba Batak, Missionaries and Colonial Officials
Negotiate the Patrilineal Order (1861-1942)**

Sita Thamar van Bemmelen

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

GOOD CUSTOMS, BAD CUSTOMS in North Sumatra

Toba Batak, Missionaries and Colonial Officials
Negotiate the Patrilineal Order (1861-1942)

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. L.M. Bouter
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen
op dinsdag 4 september 2012 om 13.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit
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door

Sita Thamar van Bemmelen

geboren te Groningen

promotor : prof.dr. H. Sutherland
copromotor : dr. E.B. Locher-Scholten

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has taken nearly three decades for this thesis to materialize. After starting with a comparative research subject in mind—the development of girls’ education in North Tapanuli (North Sumatra) and the Minahasa (North Sulawesi)—I found that it was impossible to compare apples and pears. Despite the obvious similarities—both societies embraced Christianity and were subjected to Dutch colonial rule in the nineteenth century—the development of girls’ education in these societies was dictated by their different kinship systems. This dawned on me as I was interviewing well-educated women from both ethnic groups in 1984 and 1985. Seeing the overwhelming influence of kinship and marriage in the case of the Toba Batak of Sumatra, I became fascinated by this and eventually decided to narrow the focus of research of this thesis. Two challenges then imposed a delay in finishing it: first, my work for the project ‘strengthening gender and development studies in Indonesia’ at the University of Indonesia during the years 1990–1996; after that, the necessity to adapt to a new life in my present place of residence, Bali.

Consequently, I am very grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Heather Sutherland, for not losing faith in my capacity to bring this research project to a fruitful end. I am especially grateful for her always mind-joggling questions about the themes raised in this thesis. Her persistent probing has forced me to go far beyond what I thought I was able to achieve. My co-promotor, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, has played equally important, but different roles. Without her encouragement to finish this thesis at a time when I had already given up, I would not have resumed working on it. She has fulfilled her promise to assist me at that moment with a diligence and patience that has earned her my deepest admiration and gratitude. I would also like to thank my erstwhile co-promoter Dr. Jur van Goor, for having the confidence that I could become a scholar and pushing me to start with this research. Years later he expressed regret that it has not provided me with an academic career. I would like to assure him that there is nothing to regret. I have enjoyed the intellectual challenge tremendously, and the endeavour has enriched my life.

I would like to thank Prof. T.O. Ihromi-Simatupang, my sponsor from the University of Indonesia, for her institutional support, help in finding me suitable interviewees, and for her interest in the research subject. I am grateful to the late Prof. Adrian Lapien from Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI) in Jakarta, for institutional support. As my research has drawn me into two fields that I was not familiar with—structural and legal anthropology—I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Reimar Schefold, Prof. Dr. Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, and Dr. Freek Colombijn for their comments and suggestions on relevant chapters.

To the Toba Batak women I interviewed I am very grateful, not only for their generosity in giving me their time but also for their patience explaining the intricacies of Toba Batak kinship rules, and above all for their sharing many personal stories. If I have misrepresented these in this thesis or infringed on their privacy, I sincerely apologize to them and their families. I must make special mention of the late Prof. Abbas-Manoppo in Medan and Mrs. A. S. boru Gultom and her husband in Tarutung who were so kind as to have me stay as a guest in their homes during the period I did research in 1985 in Medan and North Tapanuli. They have shown that Indonesian hospitality is deep and genuine.

Many other academics, colleagues, and friends have supported me in various ways. I thank Sitor Situmorang and Mrs. M.D. Tambunan for the uplift they gave me in believing that I

had grasped the issues predominant in late colonial Toba Batak society, when they were young. I thank Mies Grijns for her feedback on my work and support during general tribulations in life, through long letters and occasional visits over the past quarter of a century. I also like to express my gratitude to Roy Jordaan for his efforts to improve my English and his advice to look for a professional editor. Diana Darling proved to be the right person for the job. I thank her for the conscientious work and critical notes which have made the text more readable for the general public. I.B. Bayu, who is responsible for the lay-out of this thesis, also deserves my appreciation.

There are many other friends who have helped and encouraged me in one way or another whom I do not mention here by name, but they can be assured of my appreciation as well. Most of them belong to one of the following feminist discussion fora. The members of the Working Group on Indonesian Women Studies (WIVS) in the Netherlands I thank for their interest in my research, input, and criticism when I shared research ideas and findings with them between 1982 and 1990. The many women scholars and activists in Indonesia whom I met during the many seminars and workshops I have been privileged to attend since 1991 have provided me with invaluable insight into the role of customary law and state regulations in determining the lives of Indonesian women and men. I would like to thank Luh Putu Anggreni and Riniti Rahayu, my activist friends in Bali, for making me more aware of the importance of in-depth analysis of women's problems related to customs and customary law, during the many discussion meetings held since 2000 in which they have been so kind to involve me.

This research has been made possible by a generous research grant from the Foundation for Scientific Research of the Tropics (WOTRO) during the years 1984–1986. The Free University of Amsterdam gave me an additional grant in 2011, which has enabled me to finalize the thesis. Funds make research possible, but another requirement is essential as well: time. Domestic help has provided me with just that. I am particularly indebted to Kadek Wangi, who has assisted me taking care of the children and the household for more than ten years.

'Family matters' is the underlying theme of this thesis, and this also figures in its production. I wish thank both my parents who sadly cannot witness the defence of this thesis. They have always supported me and given me the mental support of always being proud of me. I would like to express my sincere and humble gratitude to my husband, Oka Pidada, who has never stopped urging me to finish this thesis. Although understandably impatient because the work seemed un-ending, he has never made an issue of this. My daughters, Amba and Bika, both on the verge of adulthood, occasionally tell me that they are afraid of becoming just like me. I attribute this in part to my being engrossed in the work for this thesis. Therefore, I dedicate this thesis to them.

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